

Abandoned Coal Mine Reclamation Cubin-Rahall Bill Outscores Administration

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Meeting the Program's Goals

Both the Administration's proposal and the Cubin-Rahall proposal raise basically the same amount of money, but the Administration bill has a far less likelihood of meeting the goals of the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Program. This is because the Administration bill does nothing to enforce the law's requirement that funds be directed at projects on a priority basis, with the top priority being the elimination of threats to human health and safety from abandoned coal mine lands. Indeed, under the Administration's bill there will be a continued hemorrhaging of funds to lower priority projects which has been the trend in recent years. In fact, the Administration's bill even contains a provision that allows a State or Tribe to completely ignore the priorities in the law. On the other hand, the Cubin-Rahall proposal contains a directive ordering strict compliance with these priorities in order to insure that reducing human health and safety threats come first.

Keeping Faith with the Coal States

After the enactment of the landmark Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, 24 States and three Indian Tribes entered into agreements with the Office of Surface Mining to assume primacy over their abandoned coal mine reclamation programs. Central to these agreements was the understanding, implicit in the law, that each State and Tribe would receive at least a 50% return on the amount of reclamation fees collected from within their borders. The Administration's proposal does not keep faith with these agreements. Instead, it says that an abandoned coal mine site in Colorado or Oklahoma is far less important than one in Pennsylvania. It says to Wyoming that it should continue to contribute into the program at a rate which exceeds amounts collected from Kentucky, West Virginia and Pennsylvania combined, and receive nothing in return. The Cubin-Rahall proposal maintains the integrity of the agreements under which this program was established. It properly maintains the 50% State/Tribal share, while at the same time, delivers a greater amount of the remaining funds to States with the largest number of high priority abandoned coal mine threats. Under the "leave no abandoned coal mine behind" philosophy of the he Cubin-Rahall bill, it also seeks to provide for the smaller States with a minimum program guarantee.

Abandoned Mines and Abandoned Coal Miners

Whether they live in Rocks Springs, Wyoming, or Salt Rock, West Virginia, thousands of elderly retired coal miners and their widows are faced with the possibility of having their health care cut as a result of looming deficits in the federal Combined Benefit Fund which is partially financed by a transfer of interest which accrues to the unspent balance of the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund. The interest finances health care for those retirees whose employers can no longer be identified. This nexus between abandoned coal mine land reclamation and providing health care to abandoned coal miners was established in 1992 and maintains a federal commitment to these miners that began in 1946. The Administration's proposal ignores that commitment. It breaks the promise by doing nothing to address the pending deficits in the Combined Benefit Fund. The Cubin-Rahall proposal on the other hand contains provisions that will avert any deficit situation without diverting reclamation funds earmarked for States and Tribes.